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Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development

Statement submitted by the International Federation of Settlements and Neighbourhood Centres, a non-governmental organization in general consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 25 July 1996.

The International Federation of Settlements and Neighbourhood Centres, a non-governmental organization (NGO) in general consultative status with the Economic and Social Council, thanks the Chairman for this opportunity to address the Commission with respect to agenda items 3 (a) and 3 (b). We wish first to congratulate the Secretariat for the substantively excellent and readable report on the implementation of the outcome of the World Summit for Social Development, and to support its conclusions.

Many of the concerns we wish to raise here we presented to the substantive session of the Council last summer, but we believe they need reintroduction in relation to the preparations for the special session of the General Assembly. We are submitting our suggestions in the hope that Governments will incorporate them in their respective activities. Our statement is limited to four specific areas. The first concerns the delivery of a broad range of social services, designed to meet the local level needs of persons living in poverty and open avenues to resources that can improve their living conditions. The

second area deals with the financial and related tools, utilized by NGOs such as settlement and neighbourhood centres, in furnishing micro-credit to low income individuals and vulnerable groups. The third area is the identification and use of social indicators that are more qualitative and appropriate for the measurement of local social needs than those currently in use. Finally, we stress the importance of providing information about community development programmes to neighbouring and other communities facing similar problems. Such information should include examples of both successful and unsuccessful measures, dealing with various vulnerable groups, including refugees and migrants.

Neighbourhood community centres have historically provided a wide range of social services to meet the needs of the community. The experience of such centres, the earliest of which, over 100 years ago, were Toynbee Hall in East London, the University Settlement in New York City and Hull House in Chicago, provides guidelines for the establishment of multi-service organizations capable of evaluating community needs and furnishing appropriate services. Today similar organizations are operating worldwide. (The network of our organization includes groups seeking to operate such services in 61 countries.) From a practical point of view, social services rendered at the local level are an essential tool to achieve social

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protection, but they must be rendered in such a way as to meet the needs of the particular environment of the community. They should be adjusted to national and local requirements. In some countries social services provided by NGOs are primarily financed by the private sector, while in others they are financed by the Government – either national or local. Comprehensive basic services should include strengthening of community organizations, provision of services specifically designed for vulnerable groups, such as battered women's shelters, treatment for substance abuse, day care for children and the elderly, to help families in need, mental health services and specialized services for migrants, refugees and internally displaced persons. These examples are, of course, in addition to health services and education, which have been generally recognized as basic social services. United Nations practice has, however, tended to marginalize vocational training and to interpret education narrowly instead of calling for a wide range of educational services, such as those provided by NGOs. Appropriate training is needed to meet the employment needs of vulnerable persons, as are appropriate welfare programmes and related social services. We ask that these concepts of social services activities be included in the discussions of the Commission and hopefully in the documentation to be provided to the Preparatory Committee.

Second, local banks and other funding sources should be encouraged to make funds available to NGOs, such as local community centres and settlement houses, for grants and low interest loans. Many of these organizations have established credit unions and similar agencies which have experience in administering such programmes. These local establishments have ongoing projects and experience in evaluating the needs and accountability of local beneficiaries, many of whom would be hesitant about seeking funds directly. The experience of many western countries should be linked to the experience of NGOs such as Trickle Up, as well as the Grameen Bank, to organize micro-credit and micro-enterprise activities to make resources available to persons living in poverty. This aspect of community financing was given great publicity two years ago but has not been implemented on the timetable outlined at the first Micro-Credit Summit. The International Federation of Settlements and Neighbourhood Centres therefore urges that serious consideration be given by the Commission to the inclusion in their recommendations of provisions

for the expansion of NGO participation in developing appropriate micro-credit mechanisms.

NGOs have long advocated the use of social indicators as a mechanism for evaluating programmes dealing with social development. NGOs at the United Nations have participated in the various technical discussions of indicators and have emphasized the values of qualitative indicators and the utility of sampling at the local level in addition to the quantitative indicators. We appreciate the new efforts of the World Bank in enlarging their field experience by collecting observational data along the same lines as has been carried out by settlement houses and other community-based organizations. NGOs have had long experience in using social indicators in evaluating and reporting to donors the effects of interventions in the community of specific projects. We urge the Commission to support the use of a variety of social indicators in addressing the implementation of the World Social Summit. We would be happy to work with those concerned in developing indicators that would be more appropriate in evaluating the effectiveness of social programmes.

Finally there is a need for exchange of information among communities dealing with both community needs and community experiences. This concept is closely connected to the concept of partnership in the implementation of United Nations plans and programmes of action pertaining to the situation of various social groups. The Federation has undertaken many exchange programmes bringing the knowledge on social work from one community to another. For example, the Federation has sponsored a series of projects dealing with social work training, with special emphasis on family issues. One provides for sending social workers from Canada to train and educate social work candidates in Lithuania. Another project has brought Venezuelan students to work in settlement houses in the United States of America on issues such as early childhood education. Still another example is a project in Albania to train volunteers to provide needed social services under the auspices of a coalition of NGOs. Cross-cutting projects between communities are often designed to give assistance to migrants as well as to internally displaced persons. Here the experience of many settlement houses and neighbourhood centres goes back to their establishment, where dealing with the problems of migrants (both internal and international) was their first

objective. We urge the Commission to consider giving a substantive role to NGOs such as the International Federation of Settlements and Neighbourhood Centres in planning partnership programmes for assistance to vulnerable groups, including migrants and displaced persons. We would be prepared to make our expert knowledge in this area available at the international as well as national levels.